

Isaiah 53

LESSON ONE

This class will focus on the most important Messianic prophecy – Isaiah 53.

Probably more Jewish people have come to the Lord through this passage than any other scripture.

We will look at:

1. The historical Jewish understanding of Isaiah 53.
2. A look at the modern day understanding of the Jewish people about this chapter.
3. A verse by verse study of the chapter.
4. Jewish objections to this chapter speaking of Jesus and how to respond.

RABBINIC THOUGHTS ON ISAIAH 53

The Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel (2nd Century), reprinted by Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1953 - titled "The Targum of Isaiah" edited with a translation by J.F. Stenning renders Isaiah 52:13 this way: "Behold, my servant, the Messiah, shall prosper; he shall be exalted, and increase, and be very strong."

The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98b (codified in the 6th century) says this of Isaiah 53: "The Messiah - what is his name?...The Rabbis say, 'the leprous one': Those of the house of Rabbi say, 'the sick one', as it is said, 'surely he hath borne our sickness'."

Rabbi Mosheh el Sheikh, known as Alshech, chief Rabbi of Safed in the 16th century, in his 'Commentaries on the Earlier Prophets' says of Isaiah 53: "Our Rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the King Messiah, and we shall ourselves also adhere to the same view."

Rabbi Joseph ben Kaspi (1280 - 1340 A.D.) warned the Rabbis that "those who expounded this section of the Messiah give occasion to the heretics (Christians) to interpret it of Jesus." In response to this Rabbi Saadia ibn Danan observed: "May God forgive him for not having spoken the truth."

S.R. Driver & Adolf Neubauer, The Suffering Servant of Isaiah According to Jewish Tradition, p. 203.

Rabbi Moshe Kohen ibn Crispin, of Cordova and afterwards Toledo (14th century) in Spain, says: "Those who for controversial reasons apply the prophecy of the suffering servant to Israel find it impossible to understand the true meaning of this prophecy, having forsaken the knowledge of our teachers, and inclined after the stubbornness of their own opinions. Their misinterpretation distorts the passage from its natural meaning, for it was given of God as a description of the Messiah, whereby, when any should claim to be the Messiah, to judge by the resemblance or nonresemblance to it whether he were the Messiah or no."

"I am pleased to interpret the passage in accordance with the teaching of our Rabbis of the King Messiah...and adhere to the literal sense. Thus shall I be free from forced and far-fetched interpretations of which others are guilty."

"This prophecy was delivered by Isaiah at the divine command for the purpose of making known to us something about the nature of the future Messiah, who is to come and deliver Israel...in order that if any should arise claiming to be himself the Messiah, we may reflect and look to see whether we can observe in him any resemblance to the traits described here: if there is a resemblance, than we may believe that he is the Messiah our Righteous; but if not, we cannot do so."

Driver & Neubauer, The Suffering Servant of Isaiah According to Jewish Tradition, p. 114, 199ff.

Rabbi Naphtali Ben Asher Altschuler (late 16th & early 17th century) states: "I am surprised that Rashi and David Kimchi have not, with the Targum, also applied them (vss. 52:13 - 53:12) to the King Messiah." Driver & Neubauer, The Suffering Servant of Isaiah According to Jewish Tradition, p. 319.

A Musaf Service prayer for the Day of Atonement (David Levy, Prayers For The Day of Atonement, 2nd edition, London, 1807, vol. III, p.37) reads: "Messiah our Righteousness has departed from us. We shudder; for there is none to justify us. He bears our load of transgression and the burden of our guilt and is verily pierced for our rebellions. He carries our guilt on His shoulder, to effect forgiveness of our sins. He bled for our salvation. O, Eternal One, the time has come that Thou shouldest create Him anew! O bring Him up from the terrestrial sphere. Raise Him up from the land of Seir, to assemble us on Mt. Lebanon, a second time, by the power of Yinnon!"

Gershom Scholem in "Sabbatai Sevi", pp. 53-54, says: "In the Tannaitic period [70-200 A.D.]the 'suffering servant' passages had occasionally been interpreted as referring to the Messiah, but later Haggadists as well as the medieval commentators preferred different interpretations. In order to undermine Christian exegesis, which identified the suffering servant as Christ, he was interpreted as a figure of Moses, or of Israel, or of the pious in general. In Jewish - Christian disputations the Jewish spokesman always denied that the passages referred to the Messiah."

LESSON TWO

When you use this passage with a Jewish person there are a couple of approaches to consider.

1. If the time with the person is going to be short ask them to read the chapter and let you know who they think it is speaking of.
2. If the time is an extended time, go verse by verse. After each verse ask them what it says. Give them help as you go along.

Biblical Exposition:

The passage starts in Isaiah 52:13-15.

Isaiah 53:

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|--------|--|
| Vs. 1 | The challenge to believe |
| Vs. 2 | The birth of the Messiah |
| Vs. 3 | The reception of the Messiah |
| Vs. 4 | The ministry of the Messiah |
| Vs. 5 | The suffering of the Messiah and its purpose |
| Vs. 6 | The cause of the sufferings of the Messiah |
| Vs. 7 | The trial of the Messiah |
| Vs. 8 | The death of the Messiah |
| Vs. 9 | The burial of the Messiah |
| Vs. 10 | The resurrection of the Messiah |
| Vs. 11 | The personal acceptance of the Messiah |
| Vs. 12 | The second coming of the Messiah |

LESSON THREE

Passage is divided into 5 groups of 3 verses.

Isaiah 52:13-15, the first section, is a summary which chapter 53 elaborates upon.

1. The Presentation of the Servant (52:13-15)

Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.

- a. The emphasis is upon the Servant's future exaltation (52:13 cf 49:7).
- b. His physical features would be so disfigured that He would no longer resemble a man (52:14).
- c. Through His disfigurement the Servant would bring cleansing to many Gentiles (52:15a; cf. Romans 11).
 - 1) "Sprinkle" is a technical word found in the Mosaic law for sprinkling blood, oil, or water (cf. Lev. 4:6; 8:11; 14:7).
 - 2) The purpose of sprinkling was to obtain ritual purity and the priest who did the sprinkling had to be pure.
- e. There will be a moment of truth for those who see the exalted Servant and realize in silent awe that He was the One who was disfigured (52:15b).

2. The Rejection of the Servant (53:1-3)

Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

- a. The emphasis is upon Israel's unbelief (53:1).
 - 1) Only a remnant would believe.
 - 2) "our report" - message of the prophets
 - 3) The message (report) - Jewish Messiah would suffer and die
 - 4) "Arm of the Lord" - speaks of salvation, personified by Jesus

- b. The Servant is not what they expected (53:2).
 - 1) He had God's favor even though not the people's - "Before him".
 - 2) "as a tender plant" indicates His servanthood - Tender plant - "fresh, young twig or shoot."
 - 3) "Like a root out of dry ground" indicates His miraculous beginning.
 - 4) "Tender plant" and "root" have messianic connotations (Isaiah 11:1; Zechariah 3:8).
 - 5) There would be nothing extraordinary in His outward appearance.
- c. His whole life would be characterized by suffering not royalty (53:3).

3. The Substitution of the Servant (53:4-6)

*Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.
 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.
 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

- a. Israel realizes that while the Servant suffered for their sins they had viewed it as His due punishment from God (53:4).
 - 1) They said He was suffering for His own sins (blasphemy).
 - 2) Matthew 8:17, took away sicknesses in His healing miracles.

"That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses."
- b. The people recognize that it was they who were guilty of sin and not the Servant (53:5).
- c. Israel laments her former blindness and straying (53:6a).
- d. Israel recognizes they have turned from God's way to their own way (53:6b).
- e. His suffering was vicarious and substitutionary in nature (53:6c).

LESSON FOUR

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12

Passage is divided into 5 groups of 3 verses.

Isaiah 52:13-15	Presentation of the Servant
Isaiah 53:1-3	Rejection of the Servant
Isaiah 53:4-6	Substitution of the Servant
Isaiah 53:7-9	Execution of the Servant
Isaiah 53:10-12	Satisfaction of the Servant

4. The Execution of the Servant (53:7-9)

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

- a. The Servant would utter no defense during His afflictions (53:7).

Uttered no defense against the accusations in either Jewish trial or Roman trial (Matthew 27:13-14; Mark. 15:3-5, Pilate; Luke 23:9, Herod)

- b. The death of the Servant (53:8).

- 1) The Servant undergoes a judicial trial.

“Oppression and judgment” refer to the legal process.

- 2) He is condemned to death by legal execution.

Not an accident, nor from old age or war, but dies by legal execution (crucifixion).

- 3) This is the first time in the Scripture that it clearly states that Messiah will die. Up to this point just said He would suffer.

- 4) Messiah suffers the legal penalty of the Law (death) instead of Isaiah’s people who deserve it because of transgression.

“my people” - consistently speaks of Israel in the O. T. Shows the Servant is distinct from Israel.

c. The burial of the Servant (53:9).

1) He was buried in a rich man's tomb.

2) The Servant was totally sinless.

Externally - *"he had done no violence"*

Internally - *"neither was any deceit in his mouth"*

3) Fulfilled in Matthew 27:57-60 when Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

5. The Satisfaction of the Servant (53:10-12)

a. The Lord was responsible for the Servant's death (53:10).

1) Not the Romans, not the Jews

2) Only God is qualified to provide salvation so Messiah's death could not be accidental.

Acts 2:23, *"Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God ..."*

b. Through the Servant God provided the ultimate and final sacrifice for sin (53:10c).

1) God was pleased with the Servant's death.

2) The Servant was an offering for sin.

c. The resurrection of the Servant.

1) *He shall see His seed* (53:10).

2) *Shall prolong His days* (53:10).

Anti-missionaries argue that Jesus had no physical children, therefore did not fulfill Isaiah 53:10 - *"he shall see his seed."* They claim that "seed" always refers to physical offspring not spiritual children such as disciples.

1. There are times when "seed" is used figuratively in Scripture.
 - a) Isaiah 57:4 *"Against whom do ye sport yourselves? against whom make ye a wide mouth, and draw out the tongue? are ye not children of transgression, a seed of falsehood."*
 - b) Psalm 22:30 *"A seed shall serve him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation."*

Verse is referring to the Messiah and parallel to Isaiah 53:10.
 - c) Rabbi Ibn Ezra (1093-1167) says that it is not used in the sense of natural issue, but of disciples or followers in his comment on Isaiah 53:10. In The Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah, Philip Feldheim, Inc., First Edition, London, 1873, reprint, pg. 245:

"This [*seed*] refers to that generation which will return to God, that is, the Law of God, in the days of Messiah."
- d. Justification is only applied to those who have a personal knowledge of the Servant (53:11).
 - 1) God's justice is satisfied.
 - 2) Their sins are put on the Servant's account.
 - 3) They are declared righteous.
 - 4) Died for all but only applied to those who believe.
- e. Servant will inherit the right to rule (53:12). (cf. Psalm 2:6-8; 110; Revelation 19:11-16).
 - 1) Because He willingly poured out His soul unto death.
 - 2) Because He was humble enough to be numbered with the transgressors.
 - a) In man's eyes - He died with thieves.
 - b) In His mode of death - Crucified on a tree.
 - (1) Hanging was prescribed for idolaters and blasphemers (Deuteronomy 21:22-23; cf. Jn. 19:31 did not want them left on the cross at night).
 - (2) Branded the person as accursed of God.
 - (3) Crucifixion was the most shameful and degrading death penalty to Jew and Gentile alike (public spectacle, naked, slow, hanging on a tree).
 - c) In God's eyes - He became sin (offering) for us (2 Cor. 5:21).
 - 3) Because He bare the sin of many.
 - 4) Because of His intercession on behalf of sinners.

Isaiah 53 speaks of Jesus. Attempts to have it speak of Israel, Isaiah, or someone else is built on prejudice and willful blindness.

LESSON FIVE

The traditional Jewish objection to Isaiah 53 speaking of the Messiah is that it speaks of Israel.

JudaismsAnswers.com on "*Rashi and Isaiah 53*" comments:

"The true way of understanding a passage is to read it in context. So if page 210 is in chapter 17, then we read chapter 17 and see what it says. And if we find a discussion of Sally and Paul and that Paul is asked to go to a hardware store, then it is irrelevant what we find in the lexicon or somewhere else in the book. We KNOW from the context what is meant. This is the only way to truly understand the intent of any author, whether human or Divine. To ignore this in the Bible not only leads to error in interpretation but shows disrespect for God and His word."

"This is, in fact, the approach taken by Rashi and other Jewish commentators who approach the text in the same way as Rash did. As I discussed in my articles on Isaiah 53 the context of Isaiah 40 - 66 strongly supports that the servant of Isaiah 53 is Israel. If we look at Isaiah 40 through 66 and ask: Who suffers and is later exalted? The answer is Israel. If we restrict that to the chapter before (52) and the chapter afterwards (54), it is still the same. Rashi, who was interested in conveying the literal meaning, would have read these chapters and come to the same conclusion: Isaiah 53 was about Israel suffering in exile."

It would be beneficial to take the class on "Israel: God's Answer to Sceptics" and "The Servant of Isaiah" to have a full answer to the claim Isaiah 53 speaks of Israel and the context "proves it." These classes are found in the "Israel in Prophecy and History" and "Jewish Evangelism" courses, respectively.

For now, we will consider the second servant passage, Isaiah 49.

This chapter brings us to the second of the servant passages (the first in 42:1-7). After nine chapters (40-48) mainly focusing on God's power, His ability to predict the future, and the condemnation of idols, we are now reminded that God will deliver His people Israel, as well as the Gentiles, from their sinfulness and idolatry. This will be accomplished through God's servant and is the main theme for the next 5 chapters. It is also important to realize that the One we identified as the speaker in chapter 48:12-22 is still speaking in this chapter. Consider Isaiah 48:12-22.

- 12 *Hearken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called; I am he; I am the first, I also am the last.*
13 *Mine hand also hath laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand hath spanned the heavens: when I call unto them, they stand up together.*
14 *All ye, assemble yourselves, and hear; which among them hath declared these things? The LORD hath loved him: he will do his pleasure on Babylon, and his arm shall be on the Chaldeans.*
15 *I, even I, have spoken; yea, I have called him: I have brought him, and he shall make his way prosperous.*
16 *Come ye near unto me, hear ye this; I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I: and now the Lord GOD, and his Spirit, hath sent me.*
17 *Thus saith the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the LORD thy God which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go.*
18 *O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea:*
19 *Thy seed also had been as the sand, and the offspring of thy bowels like the gravel thereof; his name should not have been cut off nor destroyed from before me.*
20 *Go ye forth of Babylon, flee ye from the Chaldeans, with a voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter it even to the end of the earth; say ye, The LORD hath redeemed his servant Jacob.*
21 *And they thirsted not when he led them through the deserts: he caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them: he clave the rock also, and the waters gushed out.*
22 *There is no peace, saith the LORD, unto the wicked.*

ISAIAH 49

This chapter brings us to the second of the servant passages.

The speaker in Isaiah 48:12-22 is "the LORD." This is very clear.

Notice, in chapter 49 the speaker doesn't change! It is still "the LORD."

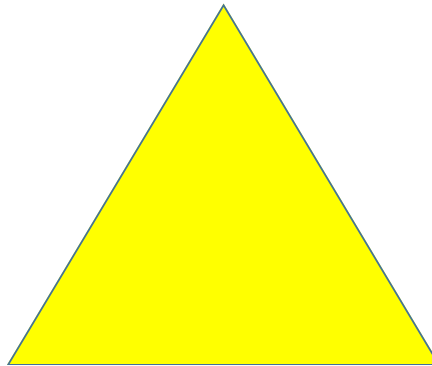
- 1 *Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye people, from far; The LORD hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name.*
- 2 *And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me;*
- 3 *And said unto me, Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.*

Exodus 19:3-6

- 3 *And Moses went up unto God, and the LORD called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel;*
- 4 *Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself.*
- 5 *Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine:*
- 6 *And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.*

Isaiah 49:3 should be viewed as the Messiah embodying the call and purpose of the nation of Israel to be a "kingdom of priests." In essence "Israel" in this verse is a name for Messiah.

Messiah accomplishes through his perfect obedience
what the (sinful) nation of Israel could not – be a priest (Psalm 110:4)



"The fates of Israel and the Messiah seem to coincide to such a degree that it is often impossible to distinguish the one from the other. Matthew reveals the same outlook when he identifies the fate of the whole of Israel with that of the child-Messiah. Edersheim is specially emphatic on the question of identification, and speaks of the Messiah as the Representative Israelite; in other words, Messiah is Israel par excellence. In the life and experience of the Messiah is Israel's history re-enacted, but with a difference. Where Israel failed, the Messiah succeeds; what Israel was meant to be, the Messiah is - the perfect Servant of God."

Jakob Jocz, *A Theology of Election: Israel and the Church*, S.P.C.K., 1958, p. 106

- 4 *Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God.*
- 5 *And now, saith the LORD that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength.*
- 6 *And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.*
- 7 *Thus saith the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the LORD that is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and he shall choose thee.*

IN SUMMARY

1. The context of the passage (Isaiah 48:12 – 49:6) has God speaking.
2. Israel is a name for the Messiah.
3. The servant (Isaiah 49:6) will “*raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the preserved of Israel*” and be “*a light to the Gentiles.*” Thus, the servant is distinct from Israel and Gentiles.
4. The context of Isaiah 53 speaks of Messiah, not Israel. To quote JudaismsAnswers.com, putting in the correct, contextual understanding:

“...the context of Isaiah 40 - 66 strongly supports that the servant of Isaiah 53 is **Messiah**. If we look at Isaiah 40 through 66 and ask: Who suffers and is later exalted? The answer is **Messiah**.”

LESSON SIX

There are many reasons within the text of Isaiah 53 that the servant can't be Israel.

- 1) "My servant" (52:13) is a singular subject.

The pronouns "he" and "him" refer back to the antecedent indicating He is an individual.

- 2) There is no indication of personification or allegory.

- 3) The Servant is contrasted with Israel collectively (53:4-6, 8).

"He," "him" are contrasted with "we," "us," "our," "my people."

- 4) The Servant is compared to a man (52:14).

- 5) The Servant is righteous (53:11) in contrast to Israel who is called a sick and sinful nation (1:4-6).

- 6) The Servant is innocent (53:4-6,8,9).

God never said Israel would suffer for being innocent.

- 7) The Servant is spoken of in messianic terms ("root," 53:2)

- 8) The Servant suffers voluntarily and silently (53:7)

The Jewish people have always protested and resisted in persecution (Warsaw Ghetto).

- 9) The Servant undergoes a legal trial (53:8).

- 10) The Servant dies (53:8).

Despite numerous attempts to destroy the Jewish people they live.

- 11) The Servant dies a substitutionary death (53:4—6).

a) God never said He would lay the iniquity of all men on Israel.

b) Israel has only suffered for her own sins.

- 12) The sufferings of the Servant would bring healing (53:5).

Centuries of Jewish suffering have failed to bring spiritual healing to the Gentiles.

Isaiah 53 is unquestionably Messianic. It is supported by the references to this chapter in the N.T. by the Jewish followers of Jesus.

Quoted 7 times in the New Testament
and always applied to the Messiah.

Allusions

52:15	Romans 15:21	53:5	Romans 4:25
53:1	John 12:38	53:4-6	John 10:11, Good Shepherd lays down life for the sheep; Philipians 2:5-10
53:4	Matthew 8:17	53:7	1 Peter 1:19; Revelation 5:6; 7:14
53:7-8	Acts 8:26-35	53:7,11	John 1:29, 36
53:9	1 Peter 2:22	53:9,11	1 John 3:5
53:12	Mark 15:28	53:8-11	1 Corinthians 15:3-4
53:12	Luke 22:37	53:8-11	2 Corinthians 5:21
		53:11	Hebrews 9:28